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2017-9

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Recommended Citation

Mhic Mhathuna, Maire & Kelleher, Cathy (2017) Reflections on a Language Planning Project in Context, *An Leanbh Óg*, Vol. 11, September 2017

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REFLECTIONS ON A LANGUAGE PLANNING PROJECT IN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect in broad terms on issues which arose in the context of an early years language planning project in Irish-medium preschools (naíonraí) in the Irish-speaking (Gaeltacht) areas of the west of Ireland. *Borradh Language Planning Project* was commissioned in 2009 to provide guidance and planning templates for early years educators to develop the Irish language competency of children in their early years groups. Due to the changing language ecology of the Gaeltacht areas, many families now raise their children through both Irish and English and children enter the early years services with differing Irish language competency levels. Three phases of the project were developed and evaluated and a high level of satisfaction was recorded with the planning templates and guidance provided. The final project report was delivered in 2015. Of particular interest in the findings is the data on educators' views on child agency and language use and their implementation of preschool-home links. These issues will be discussed in the light of the professionalization of the early years sector in Ireland; professional development opportunities and policy initiatives in both early years education and Gaeltacht education. Finally tensions between competing discourses in language and education pedagogies will be recognised and the importance of shaping approaches to meet sector specific needs acknowledged.

Key words: Language planning, preschool-home links, child agency, professionalization.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect in broad terms on issues which arose in the context of an early years language planning project in Irish-medium preschools (naíonraí) in the Irish-speaking areas of the west of Ireland (Gaeltachtaí). The paper will give a brief overview of the language planning project and then moves beyond the details of the project itself to reflect on the pedagogical issues that emerged. The findings on the adult's role and child agency in the Home Corner and the opportunities for home-preschool links will be analysed and discussed in relation to *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the recent Gaeltacht education policy document, *Policy for Gaeltacht Education* (DES, 2016).

The early years settings are sessional services situated for the most part in rural areas of the west of Ireland where the Irish language is spoken on a community basis by varying numbers of people. A survey conducted by Ó Giollagáin et al. in 2007 showed that families where both parents were fluent speakers of Irish were more likely to speak Irish but that the intergenerational use of Irish was rarer when only one parent was a fluent speaker as was often the case. The children who attend the Irish-medium preschools have different levels of competency in the Irish language and it is a challenge for educators to support language development of beginners, mid-level and competent speakers of Irish in their settings in a changing language ecology. The project was commissioned in 2009 by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta to develop language planning templates for early educators that would facilitate children's language development in a differentiated manner and provide guidance for enhanced practice. The project adopted a socio-constructivist approach to language learning, i.e. it was underpinned by the principle that language learning is based on culture and social interaction as well as internal cognitive processing (Gray and MacBlain, 2012). It recognised the importance of appropriate pedagogy and the influence of the social spheres around children on their language learning and wider development. The project also recognised the importance of and current emphasis on child agency and the value of home-preschool links in early childhood education discourse.

Three sets of thematic guidelines were developed, giving accessible theoretical background knowledge and suggesting a range of language-focused activities. The planning templates showed how the activities could be differentiated for each level of competency and how child-initiative could be encouraged and links made to parental and wider community involvement. The guidelines are available in the Irish language at www.comharnaionrai.ie/.

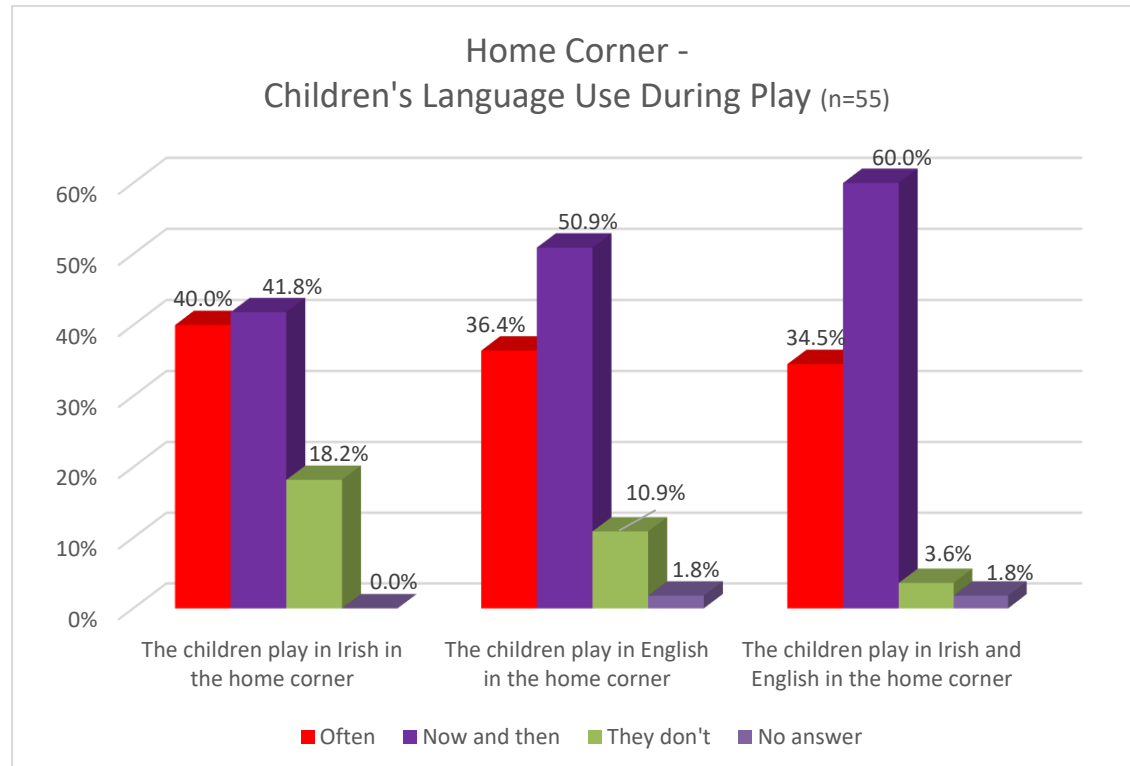
Each stage of the project was evaluated through a questionnaire administered to the educators. The evaluation was conducted in line with ethical standards laid down by Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Ethical clearance was granted by DIT Research Ethics Committee. Interesting data emerged on the implementation of two key areas, the educators' views on child agency in regard to language use and preschool-home links.

1. Adults' role and child agency in Home Corner

The Home corner is the traditional site of child agency and free play. There is a significant dilemma in working out how to facilitate child agency and children's use of the target language with educators and peers in mixed-language contexts. It was encouraging to see that

53% (often) and 24% (occasionally) of educators were listening to children's own plays and translating these into Irish (n=55). However although 87% of educators thought Child-initiated play was very important, 51% educators initiated plays often and 44% did so occasionally in the Free Play time. Over 47% strongly encouraged the use of Irish in the Home Corner but 43% preferred to gently encourage use of the language. This shows that competing discourses are at work, the early childhood education discourse on the value of child agency (James, 2005) and the discourse of language immersion education (Tedick et al., 2011). The respondents clearly recognised the value of child-led play in the Home Corner and at the same time they were implementing the philosophy of language immersion education, which is to carry out all learning experiences in the target language. In practice this meant that adults wished to lead play through Irish even when children are playing through English. These ideological dilemmas (Puskas and Björk-Willén, 2017) are not often discussed or contested in their respective communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) but influence everyday practice at a deep level.

The frequency of children's Irish and English usage during play in the Home Corner are shown below:



Approximately 40% of educators reported that the children play in Irish often and 41% play in Irish occasionally; Over 36% often play in English with an additional 51% play in in English now and then; 35% often play in both languages plus 60% occasionally play in both languages. From a language ecology point of view, it is significant that children are socialising with their peers in both languages and are developing language habits of communication through English that are likely to continue in school and the community (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007). Only 24% of settings sent leaflets with words and phrases from the Home Corner to the children's families often. The opportunity to transfer Irish into the home setting through giving families the vocabulary and phrases used by children in the Home Corner in Irish is a very rich learning opportunity to promote family use of Irish through play. It is also an opportunity to forge home-preschool links and promote discussion about the topic. Other potential opportunities to promote home-preschool links will now be discussed.

2. Home-preschool links

Data analysis revealed that the educators' focus was mainly on working with children inside the settings, with little extension outwards to families and the community. The project proposed that puppet plays and stories would be augmented by using story sacks (collections of materials based on a picture book), selecting a book of the month to be read regularly and that the words of songs and nursery rhymes used in the setting would be sent home to parents.

The survey data revealed that

- 9% sent send story sacks home often, 33% sent them occasionally and 47% did not
- Only 7% sent the book of the month home often
- 58% sent home words of songs and rhymes often and 36% did so occasionally

The most common way of connecting with parents in this way was to send the words of songs and nursery rhymes home, which shows the potential of building on this existing practice and expanding it to other areas such as books and story sacks. Parents could also be involved in making story sacks and selecting books. These issues need to be understood in the light of *Aistear*, the Irish curriculum framework for the early years, *Síolta*, the national quality framework, the developing professionalization of the early years sector and the complex linguistic ecology (Haugen, 1972) of the geographical areas involved. A broad

educational and linguistic ecological approach is adopted for this discussion reflecting the complex interplay of several competing discourses.

Aistear

Aistear curriculum framework was published in 2009 and advocates a balance between adult-led and child-led activities (p. 286), with most activities being child-led. However, little education/training was made available on a comprehensive basis at the time of publication. Some discrete/piecemeal training was made available through various projects but the main development is the publication of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (2015) which advocates an emergent curriculum approach (p.29), also implying child agency.

Issues such as the optimum balance between adult choice and child choice of language(s) are major themes with regard to working in a language immersion setting. The adult's response in immersion type setting is to accept that many children will speak in their first language but in order to promote the acquisition of the target language, adults will usually respond to the meaning of the child's utterance in the target language. The degree of resonance of this ideological approach with the focus on child-led approaches is a source of tension and is rarely articulated or discussed.

Professionalization; As a language planning project *Borradh* achieved its goals but the added value was that it highlighted the need for increased discussion at least, and hopefully action, on facilitating child agency in appropriate ways and encouraging home-preschool links. This calls for increased professionalization of the early educators as there is a well-established link between the quality of early childhood education and the education levels of educators (European Commission, 2014). The level of educators' understanding of early childhood pedagogy and of language-focused pedagogy is critical in any context, but especially so in endangered minority language situations. Most of the educators in the project were trained to Further Education levels, but modules on parental involvement or child agency may not have featured in their training. These areas in particular should be prioritised in CPD and other forms of in-service training and the training should be available in the Irish language to complement the philosophy of immersion education and the working environment of naíonraí. From a language perspective it is vitally important that materials needed to upskill are available in Irish so that appropriate technical and educational

terminology is developed and used. While those working in the naíonraí can of course read English, it is important that they continue to have/make opportunities to discuss their work through Irish in a professional manner and this includes using accepted professional vocabulary in Irish. It is noteworthy that the *Aistear* and *Síolta* framework documents are available in English and in Irish, including the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. The availability of these documents in Irish flows from the official status of Irish in Ireland, highlighting the ecological importance of national policies and their impact on early childhood education.

Training for early educators in general is low-paid and especially challenging in dispersed rural contexts (DCYA 2015). Accessibility and cost are significant factors for educators who wish to upskill, as well as the fact that not all educators wish to achieve degree level training. A system to support a degree-led workforce as outlined in the *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DES, 2010) needs to be developed through part-time degree programmes, online modules, with a planned programme of CPD training on key principles of the curriculum framework. These could include child agency, language acquisition, emergent curriculum development and parental involvement. Some of this training could be delivered on a CPD basis locally and based on the naíonra context but it would be important to have outside input as well for a broader view drawing on wider experiences in the early years.

It may be helpful to consider successful professional development for other early years educators. In other words, what kind of professional development is most likely to effect change in the knowledge, skills, and practices of early years educators and to impact on child outcomes? Eurofound (2015) found evidence that professional development that is integrated with practice within the setting and that focuses on reflection with feedback can be effective. The review found that intensive professional development involving video feedback is linked to educator change and child development outcomes in shorter-term interventions. It also found evidence to support collective participation by educators in ongoing professional development focused on pedagogy and reflection, and provided by specialists. This in turn implies that specialists who can deliver professional development through the Irish language are required for educators in Irish-medium settings.

Language ecology

The recently published Policy for Gaeltacht Education (DES, October 2016), document reiterates the importance of language socialisation in the naíonraí and the potential effect this

could have on family use of Irish. The policy also advocates a more coherent approach to education in general in Gaeltacht areas and advises that stronger formal links be forged between local primary schools and naíonraí, which would enhance the sharing of information and resources and facilitate transitions. The document advises making early educators' participation in child development programmes more accessible and developing tailored programmes on immersion and other language approaches for naíonraí staff at higher levels. They note that the DES early years inspectorate is minded to provide their services through Irish, but state that the provision of other inspection and support services is a matter for the relevant Government department.

CONCLUSION

The points discussed above show that early childhood education does not operate in a vacuum. It is closely integrated and influenced by many other areas, including early education curriculum developments, early education policies (Walsh, 2016), primary school policies, discourses on professionalization and Irish language policies. In other words we are looking at the intersection/mesosystem of these areas that influence the early childhood education received by children and delivered by educators in a complex policy area.

What are the implications for supporting early years educators in language planning for children with differing language competencies? Taking a broad ecological perspective to language and education, a planned and systematic programme of educator and teacher development should be developed under the aegis of the new Gaeltacht Education language policy and NCCA. This could include mentoring and coaching approaches delivered in local clusters of support between preschools and schools. The focus should continue to be language pedagogy but ensure that significant aspects of other educational discourses such as child agency and parental involvement are included, in addition to language-related discourses.

Some of the issues discussed may be of interest to other minority language situations, but one of the key messages is the importance of adapting educational discourses to suit local contexts. On the other hand, it is of vital importance that local educators, providers of education and training and policy makers are open to mainstream discourses and to contesting existing approaches and practices. This should lead to an integrated approach to developing children's languages as part of a holistic curriculum that is both education and language focused.

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